

Chapter Title: A Decent Peace

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The Strategy of Denial

A Decent Peace

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT WAR: what it would look like and how to wage it to prevail. Its unabashed aim is to give the United States and those who ally and partner with it a strategy for doing just that.

But it is written in the hope of peace. War is a great evil. It visits death, destruction, and suffering on civilians old and young, as well as on people in the military ranks who no more deserve to die than anyone else.

Americans and those who league with them could try to avoid risking such evils by forfeiture of the just goods they rightly prize—their security, freedom, and prosperity. But giving up these great goods would be a greater wrong than trying to secure them. So Americans and those aligned with them are right to strive for the kind of peace that respects these just interests: a decent peace.

Yet a decent peace is a paradox. It is not a naturally generating phenomenon but a willed and created thing. Not all people or states are wholly pacific, nor do they all see things the same way. Some long only for peace, but others are fearful, jealous, ambitious, or domineering enough that they are prepared to fight to get their way. Wanting a good peace is not the same thing as achieving it.¹ Hence the old saw that the best way to preserve peace is to prepare for war.

The depth of what that truism demands is often lost. It is one thing to prepare in some technical sense for war—to buy weapons or raise troops. But those weapons and troops must be readied and, if necessary, employed in ways that convince those fearful, ambitious, or domineering states that the game is not worth the candle and that they are better off accepting a tolerable peace than suffering defeat or intolerable loss. Such employment can only be the result of

reckoning with what a war would look like and deliberate, hard thought about how to fare well enough in it.

Peace, then, does not come from some unfocused readiness to be unpeaceful but only from a willingness to imagine and consider what a war would actually be like. Only from this basis can a way to act in such a war be charted out, a way that will show others contemplating violating a decent peace that it is not worth the cost and risk. Thus that decent peace we seek is the product of a reckoning with the unpeaceful. For the armed forces, this means a warlike temperament and professionalism, a willingness to train and act always as if they are on the brink of war to refine and show their readiness. For leaders and strategists, it is the willingness to think that war is always possible and something which they are prepared to embark on, combined with the moral imagination to contemplate the terrible in order to avoid it. Those who treasure a decent peace must act this way, because a refusal to countenance conflict is as—indeed perhaps more—likely as bellicosity to lead to war.

As for the strategy I have laid out here, the proof of its ultimately peaceful intentions is this: it does not ask of anyone, including China, anything that they cannot nobly and with dignity give. This is a book about war, but it is about fighting a war to prevent China or anyone else from dominating a key region of the world. It is not anti-Chinese but is written with very high respect for China and long personal and familial experience with it. All it asks of China is that it leave aside any pretensions to hegemony over Asia. China could proudly live in a world in which this strategy had succeeded; it would be one of the greatest nations of the world, and its preferences and views would command respect. It would not be able to dominate, but neither would the United States or anyone else be able to dominate it.

Success for this strategy would be a decent equilibrium for all. For the United States, the result would be an Asia with which it could trade and interact without having to obtain a by your leave from Beijing—and with it, the likelihood of a secure, free, and prosperous future. For China, it would be a world in which it was honored and respected. For the peoples of the region, it would mean the autonomy and independence for which they have striven so mightily since freedom from colonial rule.

This might very well be a tense peace, but it would be peace all the same, and consistent with America's security, freedom, and prosperity. In the world produced by the success of this strategy, it is entirely plausible that the

United States and China would never come to blows, despite the structural tendencies pressing hard in that direction. But this good outcome would be the result of America's preparedness to countenance sacrificing peace in order to preserve it.